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THE ABORIGINES OF EAST ARNHEM LAND

AUSTRALIA

Ninth Methodist Laymen's Memorial Lecture delivered by

Rev. T. T. WEBB

Methodist Missionary to North Australian Aborigines

Wesley Church, Monday, 26th March, 1934.

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Foreword

000 THE invitation of the Executive of the Laymen's Missionary Movement to deliver their Memorial Lecture for this year I regard as a very distinct honour. I also count it a great privilege to be associated with that excellent organisation in its endeavours to extend a knowledge of the missionary activities of our Church, and of the needs of the non-Christian world.

In accepting the invitation to deliver this Lecture, I am conscious of the limitations of my knowledge and ability, but undertake this important task in the hope that I may be able to make some contribution—however slight—to the solution of the problem presented by the condition of our Australian Aborigines.

121 This Lecture is not to be regarded as a scientific treatise. Matters of custom and belief are inexhaustively dealt with, and then only in so far as they serve to indicate the characteristics of aboriginal life and culture. Moreover, while aboriginal culture throughout Australia is of the one general type, there is a wide variation of detail between different districts. What is said here claims to be true in detail of East Arnhem Land only.

000 The ground covered by this Lecture is of necessity limited. Many phases of this aboriginal problem I have been obliged to leave untouched. Also the preparation of this Lecture has had to be accomplished amid a full round of other duties, but I trust that its many deficiencies may not altogether deprive it of value to those who are concerned about the urgent national duty of discharging our responsibilities toward this Australian Aboriginal race.

T. THEODOR WEBB.

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Introduction

The record of our contact with, and administration of, the aborigine is one of failure. It has not only resulted in the extinction of the majority of those with whom we have come in contact, but also of the degradation of the survivors. The blame for this cannot be laid at the door of any one section of the community, but it rests with every one of us. It is impossible for us, as individuals, to shelve this responsibility on the ground that we know nothing of the aborigine, for, in condoning the state of affairs that now prevails, we accept responsibility for it. I believe that any real change in our treatment of this much-wronged race can only result from a complete "change of heart on the part of the community towards primitive peoples, in short, to all those whom we are pleased to call coloured."

The first step towards the solution of any difficulty is to understand it, and in this little book Mr. Webb has made a definite step in that direction. It is not only an interesting account of a primitive people, written by one who obviously loves them and understands them; it is a valuable introduction to the study of the anthropology of the area, and as such is a very real contribution towards the solution of the problem.

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20th April, 1934.

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The Aborigines of East Arnhem Land

A BOOMERANG

A nation's soul at stake!
Now seared and hurt with ill;
Bereft of stick and stake,
By callous alien's will.

A nation's soul at stake!
And that the white man's soul!
He must atonement make
Ere he redeem it whole.

—J.E.P.

Present Condition and Possible Future

144 The natives of East Arnhem Land belong to the Aboriginal race which, prior to white settlement, occupied the whole of this Australian continent. Though these north coastal districts were, during a long past, frequently visited by maritime traders from the Malay Archipelago, there is no evidence of any racial admixture sufficient to produce a variation of physical or mental characteristics, but some few cultural traces of these visitations are to be observed.

582 616 617 The social organisation of these people conforms in general principle to that which is familiar to all students of this Australian race. There are, first of all, two individually exogamous, but intermarrying moieties, in this case known as Yirritcha and Dua respectively. Each of these moieties is divided into four sub-sections, making eight sub-sections in all. Marriage can only be between a man and a woman of opposite moieties, and is further regulated by the fact that a man of a particular sub-section of one moiety may marry only a woman of a particular sub-section of the opposite moiety. (See page 8.)

[611] The moieties are determined by patrilineal descent, but the sub-sections by matrilineal descent. That is, the children of a Yirritcha man will also belong to the Yirritcha moiety, but their sub-section is determined by that of the mother, irrespective of that of the father. Therefore, a Yirritcha man of the Bungardi sub-section normally marries a Dua woman of the Kumandjan sub-section. Their children belong to the father's moiety, and so are Yirritcha, but belong to the Bulain sub-section. A

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Kumandjan woman's children will always belong to the Bulain sub-section, and this order obtains right through the intermarriage of the eight sub-sections of the tribe. 582 611 616 617

All the members of each sub-section, both male and female, possess a definite relationship to some particular bird or animal, which constitutes their class totem or "jungoin." This form of totemism is but poorly developed, and any mature person, after passing through a brief ceremony, may freely kill and eat his or her totem animal. (See page 16.) 616 617

In this area the distinctive feature of the tribal organisation is the emphasis placed on the local hordes or clans, which are of great number, and in some cases contain but few individuals. Each horde consists of men of one moiety only, with their wives of the opposite moiety, and each horde possesses a definitely defined territory, which in every case includes a ceremonial totemic centre. This ceremonial totemism is, in contrast to the class totemism, very highly developed, and is of the utmost significance and importance. 614 621 778

These ceremonial totems, which are very numerous, in the vast majority of cases consist of— 532 778

(a) Representations of utensils and implements believed to have been originated, used and conferred upon the people by certain mythological ancestors.

(b) Representations of natural species associated in legend with these ancestors.

(c) Representations of these mythological ancestors themselves.

All of these are highly conventionalised in design.

These "Muraian," as they are called, lie at the basis of most of the ceremonial life of the people. They are most jealously guarded, and are believed to exercise a profound influence on the fortunes of the clan. The revelation of and the explanation of these "Muraian" constitute one of the most important stages in the education of the young men. 614 778

During the "Nara" ceremonies, which are associated with these "Muraian," the initiates have impressed upon them the ancient tribal regulations and sanctions. They are warned against being insolent to their elders, against dishonesty, against lying, against improper relations with women, and so are enforced many excellent ethical lessons. During their period of instruction they are placed under a food tabu, and are informed that any breach of the regulations taught will result in illness or deformity. 796 867 [784]

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778 The aid of these "Muraian," in which are believed to reside the spirits of their tribal ancestors, may be invoked, and I have heard an old man, addressing a group of initiates, declare that he had lived to an old age because he had been true to his "Muraian," which, he said, had protected him from his enemies and generally cared for him. One man told me that when away out at sea in his canoe, and being suddenly overtaken by a violent storm, he had called upon his "Muraian," and by their aid had been brought safely to land.

614 621 688 796 [778] During the preparations for, or the holding of, these ceremonies it is expected that all matters likely to disturb the peace will be carefully avoided. If someone commits an offence during that period it is regarded as an insult to the particular "Muraian" concerned, and the men of the horde become most violently angry. In such a case the offender must make liberal payments to the chief men of the horde, who, in extreme cases, however, are not satisfied until the offender has been seriously injured, or even killed.

561 778 [587] Though at an early age youths are given some information concerning their own "Muraian," no man undertakes the manufacture of these sacred objects before middle life, and then only under the direction of the old men. From time to time, as opportunity presents itself, a man is shown the "Muraian" of hordes other than his own. Such knowledge is in no way compulsory or essential to his taking his full place in the tribal life, but rather marks an additional stage in his education, and so increases his influence.

614 616 619 778 It is through these "Muraian" that the only cohesion between the various scattered hordes is obtained. Hordes or clans of the same moiety, though as widely separated as Elcho Island and Blue Mud Bay, hold in reverence the same mythological ancestors, possess the same "Muraian," and so regard themselves as the same people.

000 It will be seen, from the above, how wide is the influence of these totemic beliefs, and how important a place they occupy in the life of the people. Further brief reference will be made to them under the heading of Death and Burial Beliefs and Customs.

1 [i.e. "NARA" CEREMONIES — ANALYST]

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The regular system of marriage between the sub-sections, with the sub-sections of the offspring, is as follows:— 582 617 611

Yiritcha man	Dua woman	Yiritcha children	
		Male	Female
Ngarit	Bilindjan	Bangardi	Bangaritjan
	Kalian	Kaijark	Koitjan
Bulain	Kalian	Kaijark	Koitjan
	Bilindjan	Bangardi	Bangaritjan
Kaijark	Warmutjan	Ngarit	Ngaritjan
	Kumandjan	Bulain	Bulaindjan
Bangardi	Kumandjan	Bulain	Bulaindjan
	Warmutjan	Ngarit	Ngaritdjan

Dua man	Yiritcha woman	Dua children	
		Male	Female
Buralang	Bulaindjan	Warmut	Warmutjan
	Ngaritjan	Karmarung	Kumandjan
Balang	Ngaritjan	Karmarung	Kumandjan
	Bulaindjan	Warmut	Warmutjan
Karmarung	Bangaritjan	Buralang	Kalian
	Koitjan	Balang	Bilindjan
Warmut	Koitjan	Balang	Bilindjan
	Bangaritjan	Buralang	Kalian

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Everyday Life

262 511 Being a purely nomadic people, the greater part of the time of these aborigines is devoted to the procuring of food. The coastal districts of Arnhem Land are much better supplied than the arid areas of the inland, but even there a serious shortage of food is by no means infrequent. Almost all living creatures are eaten, as well as a large variety of roots and berries, but there is ever the daily uncertainty concerning the supplying of the body's needs.

461 517 When not engaged in hunting, the men spend many hours fashioning their weapons and utensils, in which work they display a marked degree of skill and ability. The preparations for, and the actual performance of, ceremonials occupy much time and energy, and in these their love of decorative and dramatic art finds truly remarkable expression.

462 The women are the real burden-bearers. When the camping ground is reached, it is the women who have to prepare the camp and obtain the necessary wood and water. Every day they engage in the search for food, such as the smaller animals, roots, berries, and shell fish. No matter how successful the men have been in their pursuit of larger game, the women must not fail in their daily contribution to the needs of the family. To them also falls the care of the younger children, and the construction of most of the utensils for ordinary use.

854 Great affection is shown by both parents for their children, who are rarely corrected, and whose every whim is responded to.

[142 145] When an aboriginal baby is born it is of a light yellowish colour, but during the course of a week or so darkens to the normal

[302] chocolate-brown of the race. For the purpose of ensuring this deepening of colour, the infant, when two or three days old, is rubbed all over with a mixture of ashes and powdered charcoal.

[856] Immediately after birth the nose is flattened and the nostrils distended by finger pressure. The form of the skull is also moulded by the mid-wife's hands.

853 145 Babies are nursed by their mothers until they are up to four years of age, and during that period are extremely plump and soft-fleshed. After weaning, however, they quickly develop into the spindly-limbed form characteristic of the children of many PRIMITIVE RACES.

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primitive races. After the age of six or seven years the children very largely pass out of the direct care of their actual parents, and become part of the tribal group. Quite frequently they will spend weeks and months away with other members of the horde, but no concern is felt on their behalf. They are the children of the clan rather than of their actual parents. 000 854 858 614

At about the age of nine or ten the boys are taken away from the care of the women and the companionship of the younger children, and are prepared by the men for their initiation into the real life of the tribe. The chief feature of initiation in this area is the rite of circumcision, which is universally practised in East Arnhem Land. This actual ceremony is followed by a period of instruction, during which the boys are acquainted with their "marlk," or sub-section, their "jungoin," or totem, and the various laws and tabus designed to regulate their lives as members of the tribe. 852 [304] [867]

There is in this area no initiation ceremony for girls, who, for the main part, accompany the women in their search for food, and generally become acquainted with the duties which they will be required to perform in later life. [852] 857 868

In this district the children have nothing in the way of organised games, and for the main part find their amusement in the imitation of the doings of their elders. The boys arm themselves with the strong stalks of the long tropical grasses, and, taking sides, engage in strenuous spear fights. The girls play at cooking, the building of little humpies, and the nursing of babies represented by small bundles of paper bark. Both sexes join in elaborate mourning ceremonies over a dead bird or young animal, breaking off their wailing to indulge in hearty bursts of laughter. Life for them, during their early years, is happy, care-free, and undisciplined.

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Marriage and Relationship

578 In the social life of the people polygamy is generally
595 practised, some men having as many as eight wives. While a good deal may be said in justification of this practice among a nomadic people, such as these aborigines are, it is a very fruitful cause of trouble and strife. This is occasioned by the jealousy which older wives frequently feel toward their younger tribal
[589] sisters, and also by the fact that, because of this system, many young men of marriageable age are unable to obtain partners. This latter fact, not unnaturally, leads to the stealing of women and general breaches of the moral laws of the tribe.

562 One, to us, highly unjust custom is to punish a woman who
627 has been stolen, even though she has been taken away by force,
672 much more severely than the man who has stolen her. In most
684 cases she is, when recovered, badly speared or beaten, in some cases so severely treated as to be killed, while the man who has taken her, unless he occupy a prohibited relationship to the woman, is usually let off with a severe lecturing.

627 Generally all the relatives of the wronged husband who are
684 present will join in this brutal chastisement of the woman, their action being justified by the fact that they "feel sorry" for their fellow-tribesman. Perhaps experience has proved the value of this method of controlling domestic relationships.

582 Marriage, as previously indicated, is regulated by the social
584 organisation of the tribe. There are only certain men of the opposite moiety who are eligible to become the husband of any particular girl or woman. To one of these men the girl is given in infancy, and, though this man has nothing directly to do with her until she reaches the age of puberty, he is required, during the years of her infancy and girlhood, to fulfil certain obligations, such as the making of presents of food, weapons or utensils, to her father.

[585] Because of this custom, there is nothing approaching a ceremony of marriage among these people, the girl during infancy as really belonging to the man as she will later on when he actually
587 takes her to wife. When a man dies, his wife or wives immediately
768 pass over to one or more of his tribal brothers, so that, excepting in the case of a few very old women, there are no widows, and there are no orphans in this aboriginal community.

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Relationship

All the various individuals of the tribe are related the one to the other, but that relationship is classificatory rather than personal, so that the relationship terms used by us cannot be a correct translation of the terms used by this aboriginal community. In the tribe are a certain number of men whom a given individual will call "father," the individual's actual father being one of that number. Certain other men are the individual's "gowal," or fathers-in-law, his actual father-in-law being included among them. 601 602

So all of a number of women of the tribe, including his actual mother, are his "ngandi," or mothers. A number of other women are an individual's "yappa," or sisters, and among these will be included his actual sisters. So right through the personnel of the tribe. Every individual member of the tribe is included in one of these many relationship groups or classes, and every relationship carries with it certain obligations. That is, an individual is required to fulfil the same obligations toward all those who stand in the relation of "ngandi" (mother) to him, as those which are due to his actual mother, and so on.

Thus is determined the attitude of every individual toward every other individual. This system of relationship lies at the basis of all social behaviour, and is of the utmost importance in the life of this aboriginal community. In connection with this system amazing qualities of memory are revealed, practically every individual knowing in what relation he or she stands to every one of the several hundred members of the tribe. This is the more remarkable in view of the dislocation in the regular order of descent occasioned by irregular marriages, of which there are a considerable number. 602 [182] [153] [588]

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Character, Arts and Crafts

Personal Character.

152 522 In personal character these aborigines are light-hearted and happy, with a great fondness for practical joking. Anything which places another in a position of discomfiture is hugely enjoyed. They are quick and rather violent tempered, but on the whole their temper is shortlived.

152 579 A comparatively trifling offence will quickly result in a general disturbance, in which both sexes engage, and during which weapons are brandished and an amazing amount of mutual abuse is indulged in, but usually little serious damage is done, and, having talked themselves out, life soon returns to its normal course.

157 As might be expected, there are some few individuals of a more sullen and anti-social type who become notorious as trouble-makers, and who constitute a difficult problem for their own people. The outstanding weakness of the aborigine's character is his want of a sense of personal responsibility. Rarely does a man act on his own initiative or assume and maintain an individual attitude in regard to any matter.

[157] [182] 614 672 This is undoubtedly accounted for by the fact that in the aboriginal community the unit is not the individual, but the tribal horde. The tribe or group stands or falls together. Every member of it shares in the honour or disgrace of any one of its number. An offence by one member is regarded by another tribe or division as an offence by the whole of the offender's division. All are held as being equally guilty.

614 628 672 In such serious offences as occasion the shedding of blood, the members of the injured tribe or division make no special attempt to avenge themselves upon the individual who has actually committed the offence, but are as well satisfied if they succeed in punishing any member of the party to which he belongs. Though the tribe as a whole may strongly disapprove of the action of one of their number, by which action hostility has been created between them and another tribe, they, knowing they are all involved, must nevertheless stand behind this particular individual.

182 157 614 [672] In this way is the individual relieved of the responsibility of his own actions, and does not personally realise their results EITHER FOR GOOD OR ILL,

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either for good or ill. Thus there are found few natural leaders among these people, a man's individuality being submerged in the life of his horde or tribe. This same fact, coupled with the extreme isolation in which this race has for centuries lived, has also served to stultify progress. 157 182 [614]

Only by a man of exceptionally forceful character could reforms be instituted, and life has consequently gone on practically unchanged for countless generations. 178

Toward those whose friendship has been proved these aborigines show a splendid spirit of loyalty. Those who treat them in a fair and friendly fashion will receive fair dealing and devoted friendship in return. 577

Arts and Crafts

The weapons and utensils used throughout this area correspond to the usual aboriginal type, but include a number of local variations. Little use is made of any weapon other than the spear, though clubs of several types are used to a limited extent, as also are boomerangs. 411

There are many varieties of wooden spears, barbed and unbarbed, some of which have the head and the haft fashioned out of a single piece of hardwood in a very remarkable way. Flaked stone spear-heads are much used, particularly for fighting, and these heads are traded over wide distances. [438]

The use of iron, particularly for spear-heads and cutting implements, has been known for many decades, this material being obtained in limited quantities from the old traders from Macassar. Only boomerangs of a heavy type are used, and these are by no means common. The light, return boomerang is unknown, as is also the shield. 177 411 439

Many types of "dilly-bag" are made, some of which are of such fine texture as to retain water. Others are highly decorated with feathers or fur woven in during manufacture. The material used in most cases is the split leaf of the pandanus palm. Other bags are made of string knotted very neatly and evenly in an open mesh. Fish nets are also constructed in the same way. 415 [285] [286]

Excellent string is manufactured from bark fibre, grass, fur, and human hair, and is used for a wide variety of purposes. Much of it designed for ceremonial purposes is decorated with feathers interwoven during spinning. Strong rope is made of bark fibre or grass, and used in the harpooning of turtle, dugong, or porpoise, and for the mooring of canoes. 283

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The soft bark of the giant tea-tree, commonly called paper-bark, is utilised for such purposes as the bandaging of wounds, the protection of spear points, the covering of huts, the carrying of babies, the parcelling of food, and the making of receptacles in which water is carried. 314

Fire is produced by wooden drills. The end of the drill is placed in a notch cut in a piece of soft-wood, which is held on the ground by the foot, and the drill is then spun between the palms of the hands. I have seen fire produced by this means in as short a time as 35 seconds. 372

Large dug-out canoes are made from the trunks of trees of several species, and in these canoes long voyages are made across the open sea. 501

The only musical instruments used, if they may be so termed, are the "Yiraki," or drone-pipe, and the "Bilma," or clap-sticks. The Yiraki is about four feet in length, and is constructed of a piece of wood about three inches in diameter which has been hollowed by termites. At the smaller end a mouthpiece is formed of beeswax. This instrument supplies a droning accompaniment during the singing of chants. No tune upon it is possible, its range being limited to three notes of the scale, which are produced by a variation of the wind pressure. 534

The Bilma are simply two pieces of hardwood, oval in section, and about one foot in length, which, being struck together, supply the "time" for chants and dances.

Sometimes two boomerangs are held in the one hand, separated by one or more fingers, and by a quick movement of the wrist are made to produce a rhythmic rattling.

In the manufacture of these various weapons and utensils a high degree of constructive skill and neatness of workmanship is evidenced. Practically all these articles are richly ornamented, and probably nowhere in Australia has aboriginal decorative art reached a finer development than in East Arnhem Land. 531

617 The eight sub-sections, with their totems, are as follows:—

Sub-sections		Totems
Male	Female	
(Yiritcha)		
Ngarit	Ngaritjan	Slender-limbed kangaroo
Bulain	Bulaindjan	Stout-limbed kangaroo
Kaijark	Koitjan	Fork-tailed kite
		Large black lizard
		Wagtail
Bangardi	Bangaritjan	Emu
(Dua)		
Buralang	Kalian	Agile wallaby
		Smaller wallaby
Balang	Bilindjan	White-breasted sea-eagle
Kamarung	Kumandjan	Wedge-tailed eagle
Warmut	Warmutjan	Black-breasted buzzard
		Black-nosed kangaroo

(611) (616) The moieties are determined by patrilineal descent, but the sub-sections by matrilineal descent.

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Warfare and Physique

Warfare

[619] 721 On account of the want of cohesion between the various tribal hordes, each of which maintains to a large extent a separate and independent existence, various causes, such as the competition for women, give rise to much hostility, and warfare is a pronounced feature of the life of this aboriginal community. Though an organised clash of arms is of infrequent occurrence, many are killed under varied circumstances as a result of this tribal hostility. 628 Numerous killings also result from family vendettas, which are carried on through many generations. In the pursuance of these vendettas the usual practice is to take a man by stealth, while he is asleep or when separated from his companions.

A ceremony known as "Makkarata" is a very important and valuable means of healing breaches of the peace. In this ceremony two groups of men, composed of the offending and the offended tribes or divisions respectively, take up their positions some 150 yards apart on a piece of open ground. With each of these groups will be a number of neutral men, who are not concerned in the dispute in question, whose duty it is to see that no unfair advantage is taken by either party.

The chief offender, who is also accompanied by neutrals, then runs backwards and forwards across the centre of the ground, while each man of the offended party throws one or more spears at him. If this man succeeds in avoiding the spears thrown, he then, in a descriptive dance, approaches the offended party, and taking his stand in front of their leader thrusts out his leg, into which a spear is promptly plunged. In this way the offence is wiped out, and peace is restored between these previously hostile parties. I have known feuds of many years' standing to be completely healed by this ceremony.

Physique

142 These coastal tribes of East Arnhem Land are physically of a fine type, virile, pugnacious, and manly. Though generally somewhat slighter in build, the average height of both sexes is approximately the same as that of our own race. Because of their nomadic life, their continual walking, running and dancing, most

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of them are in a condition of perfect physical fitness, lithe and graceful in all their movements, and tireless in their own pursuits. 142

Various diseases, such as yaws, tropical ulcers, and ophthalmia, are frequently observed, while there are some cases of gangosa, granuloma, and leprosy. Epidemics of measles, influenza and whooping cough have upon occasion been carried through from the outer fringes of settlement, and have badly stricken these isolated tribes. 164

These aborigines will survive an almost unbelievable amount of physical injury, but they quickly succumb to diseases of a general character, particularly to fevers and pulmonary complaints, against which no constitutional powers of resistance have been developed. Considerable medicinal use is made of a wide variety of herbs and plants, but most of their practices in this realm are crude and of little value. In many cases it is believed that, as magic has caused disease, so counteractive magic will heal. 755 757

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Magical Beliefs

[578] 754 A profound belief in magic enters very largely into the life of these people, and is a very fruitful cause of tribal quarrels and killings. The most important of these beliefs concerns magical killings by sorcerers known as "Ragalk."

According to this belief, the Ragalk, having selected his victim, or having been commissioned by another to bring about the death of a certain individual, waits until he finds this man alone, out hunting or passing between camps, and, seizing him, soon reduces him to a condition of unconsciousness. Then, making a deep incision into the thorax, he thrusts in his hand and squeezes all the blood out of the victim's heart and other organs. The blood is caught in paper-bark baskets, and allowed to dry, and is later partaken of by the Ragalk and his companions. These are usually two or three younger men being instructed in this art of magical killing. Having secured the blood, the Ragalk, by an elaborate process, hides all traces of the operation and restores the victim to consciousness and normal life, so that he returns to camp entirely unaware of what has taken place. Before releasing him, the Ragalk determines how long the victim shall live, which may be for several weeks, and by what means he shall actually die. He may determine that the man shall die from snake-bite, or be speared, or taken by a shark or crocodile, but, whatever happens, it is the Ragalk who is really responsible for the person's death.

682 761 Among these people there is no belief in death from natural causes, so that every death is believed to be the result of evil magic, and steps are immediately taken to determine who is responsible for it. The number of men who are believed to possess this magical power is limited, so it is usually a matter of determining which one of a comparatively small number is guilty. This is done by methods which are utterly unscientific, but which are thoroughly convincing to the aboriginal mind. In this way tribal quarrels and vendettas are begun and continued, and practically every death is followed by a violent upheaval of the tribal life.

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Magic and Disease.

The exercise of magic is also believed to be the cause of epidemic and other diseases. One man known to me is suffering from leprosy in an advanced form, and the belief is that his condition is the result of magic directed in the following way:— The man who desired to injure him, because of a quarrel over an aboriginal woman, first of all built a rude bark hut. On the inside of the bark a grotesque figure was drawn, to which was given the name of the victim. The hut was then fired, and, as it burned, this man is said to have "sung" his victim, expressing the desire that as the fire destroyed the figure on the bark, so disease would destroy the other man. 753 754

When an epidemic of measles broke out at Goulburn Island, the cause was looked for locally, and one of the old men supplied the following explanation:—Some time previously a man had died of injuries received in a tribal quarrel. That death had never been avenged, so two of his tribal brothers made their way to a spot on the mainland which is associated with the activities of their tribal ancestors, and so is tabu. Taking some damp earth from this spot, these men lit a fire, in which stones were heated, the sacred earth being then placed on the heated stones, and the whole covered with paper-bark.

As the smoke and steam emerged, these men danced round the fire, and, addressing the smoke, requested it to go over to the island and smite the people there with sickness and death, as punishment for the killing of their brother. Proof that it did so is for these people found in the fact that disease came, and a number sickened and died.

The coming of whooping cough to our Milingimbi Station is explained in a similar way. Near to this station is another of these places sacred to two mythological female ancestors. Legend has it that at this spot these women were seized with a serious coughing complaint, and, ejecting the sputum, remarked, "We will leave this sickness here for future inhabitants of this place." A man, who is believed to have had a grudge against certain of our station people, is said to have first cut down a milk-wood tree at this sacred spot, and to have reduced it to small chips. He next stooped over these chips, coughing and spitting, until he fell exhausted. On recovering, he placed these prepared chips on a [778]

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753 fire, and, as the smoke ascended, he asked it to carry this coughing
754 sickness to these people.

754 In this aboriginal community are men known as Gulung, or
756 "Marrngit," who exercise magic in a curative or preventive way. Their chief function is to discover and combat the sinister purposes of the Ragalk, or of evil spirits. Neither the Ragalk nor the Marrngit occupy a position apart from the ordinary life of the people, nor do they exercise any special functions in the ceremonial life of the tribe.

628 Magic is also believed to operate through an article known
765 as "Maiyabala." When a man dies or is killed, a scrap of one of
778 his bones, or a piece of one of his weapons or utensils, is given by one of his near relatives to each of his friends. This article is known as a "Maiyabala," and carries with it this important significance. Every man accepting the "Maiyabala" places himself under the obligation of doing his best to avenge the death of the deceased. I have known men who have allowed themselves to be persuaded into accepting the "Maiyabala," to be later deeply troubled when they have considered the probable consequences of their action. There is no way of escaping the obligation, and these men have thus made themselves party to a serious quarrel which probably does not concern them.

[672] When a man, in fulfilment of this obligation, kills another, he
765 is usually relieved from personal responsibility in the matter, the
778 magical property of the "Maiyabala," by directing the man's spear and giving strength to his throw, being regarded as the actual cause of the killing. The Maiyabala is also worn as a charm, and is believed to assist the wearer in fighting or in the pursuit of game, the idea being that the spirit of the dead man reinforces and assists that of the wearer of this relic.

775 Closely allied to the above are some of the beliefs concerning the "Mali," or lesser spirits, of men who have been killed. When a man has killed another it is believed that the "Mali" of the slain seeks to enter the person of the slayer, the idea here being that, by overcoming the man's body, the victor has also overcome his spirit, which now seeks to serve its new master. Numbers of men of my acquaintance claim to have passed through this experience.

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The entrance of the "Mali" is said to produce a kind of trance, and to be accompanied by severe abdominal pains, caused by the movements of the "Mali" within the man. The fact of its entrance is always known, as the man suddenly becomes big and strong, efficient as a fighter, and lucky in his quest for game. 775 [753]

"The pessimist sees a difficulty in every opportunity, the Christian should see an opportunity in every difficulty."

— Dr. S. M. Zwemer.

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Burial and Mourning

Upon the death of a person, especially one of honour and influence, violent expressions of grief are indulged in. The men stand in groups, with spears reversed, with tears streaming down their faces, with the whole body relaxed into a drooping posture, and mournfully chant the death song of their tribe. Meanwhile, the women keep up a dreadful wailing, cut their heads with flints, shells, or sticks until the blood pours down their naked bodies, and throw themselves upon the ground in an utter abandonment of grief. These performances are repeated several times over, especially if fresh parties arrive at the camping ground. 152 763

Before the body is disposed of, there is painted upon it the totemic design of the horde to which the deceased belonged, and to the spirit or totemic centre of which the soul of the departed is believed to return. The body is disposed of either by interment in the ground or by being placed upon a platform constructed for the purpose. 764

In either case, after the body has decomposed, the bones are recovered by male relatives and painted with red ochre. A ceremony is then held, during which the bones are handed over to the female relatives of the deceased, and by them are carried about, sometimes for several years. For this purpose a cylinder of bark is constructed, which is also painted with the person's totemic symbols. Finally, another elaborate ceremony is held, when the bones are broken and deposited in a tall hollow post, which is planted upright in the ground at any convenient place. 765

While the body is awaiting burial, certain near male relatives of the deceased make in the ground a representation of the particular totemic centre, and there ceremonially partake of food, which is known as "Wukandi." None of this food must be given to outsiders, nor must these men partake of food elsewhere. In this way they enter into communion with their departed brother, who is believed to be present with them in these ceremonial meals. 764

Shortly after the disposal of the body, the near relatives of the deceased pass through a purification ceremony, known as "Wontjurr," during which they are washed in a representation of the pool which constitutes the totemic or spirit centre of their 764 783

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hordes. Until this ceremony has been held, these individuals must not share food with others, and so are, for the time being, shut off from the normal life of the community. 764 783

Behind all these beliefs there exists a very rich mythology concerning the existence and exploits of culture heroes who are believed to have originated the customs of the people. 773

"Speak but the word; the Evangel shall awaken
Life in the lost, the hero in the slave."

—F. W. H. Myers

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Spiritual Entities and Creation

Mali and Birrimbirr

[774] 775 Man is believed to possess two spiritual entities, the "Mali," or lesser spirit, and the "Birrimbirr," or spirit proper. When a person dies, the Mali for a time inhabits the accustomed haunts of the deceased, and then returns to the spirit centre of the [778] particular horde. Every one of these spirit centres includes a pool or spring of water, generally with trees and shrubs surrounding it, and the Mali is believed to enter either into the water or into one of the trees growing beside it. If one of these trees should be destroyed, it is believed that disaster will follow, for the destruction of the tree is regarded as equivalent to the destruction of the one whose Mali resides within it.

775 787 These Mali, or spirits, are believed to be reborn in successive generations of the people. The Mali comes to a man in a dream and says to him, "I want my mother." "Where shall I find my mother?" The man, still in the dream, replies, "Your mother is there," and directs it to his wife. The Mali enters the woman, and later on is reborn into the life of the tribe. Always, when a man so dreams, he passes through some peculiar experience, the significance of which is not realised until afterwards.

For example, a man known to me was one day looking for food along the beach when he saw a fish of a rare, deep-sea variety floating in a most unusual way. This fish he captured and took back to the camp, where he recounted to his companions the circumstances under which he had found it. Other men present refused to partake of it, professing that they were not hungry. This man himself did, and then lay down and slept. While he slept he dreamed that a child spirit came to him in the manner indicated, but he did not associate the two facts until later, when he realised that his wife was to give birth to a child. He was then told by the other men who had been present on the previous occasion that they had refused to eat the fish because they knew

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775 it was not an ordinary fish, but was being used by the child spirit
787 as a means of approaching its prospective father.

774 The Mali is shared by man with the whole of the lesser creation. Every living creature, every tree, the very ground itself has its Mali. There can be no existence apart from this spiritual quality.

775 After death the Birrimbirr, or spirit proper, is believed to pass on to Buralkor, the spirit world, which is believed to exist on this world plane away beyond the sun-rising. In this world there are two regions, one good, the other bad, but the spirit's ultimate destination is in no sense determined on ethical grounds. Reaching Buralkor, the spirit once again becomes clothed in physical form, and life goes on as it is lived here.

Creation

773 In the dim dawn days of the world, previous to the existence
776 of men and women as they are found to-day, the world was peopled by a race of semi-human, semi-animal creatures, who were intimately concerned with the origin of the social and ceremonial life of the people. Some of the descendants of these creatures developed into purely animal forms, and others into humans, and many of the "bungals," or open ceremonies, of the people consist of a dramatic recounting of their doings. Behind these there existed certain demi-gods, who were the agents of creation and the ancestors of the present tribal groups. From them the various ceremonial totems were received, and by them the social organisation was established.

Back of these again is the hazy conception of a great spirit known as "Wungarr," by whom the actual agents of creation are believed to have been commissioned and sent forth. The term "Wungarr" is also applied to the dream days of pre-history. By far the most important of these beliefs are those which centre round "Kaitchalan," who is conceived of as a great serpent inhabiting a pool in the upper reaches of the Woolen River. This great creature is believed to have devoured two women who were the most important of the agents of creation, so usurping their powers, and making himself the originator of tribal organisation, social laws and customs, and ceremonial life.

776 Although regarded as in a special sense the ancestor of a certain totemic group of hordes, the power and influence of Kaitchalan are recognised and accepted by all divisions of the tribe.

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796 The three most important and most elaborate ceremonies, the Junggawon, the Ngulmarrk, and the Gunabibbi, as well as several others of lesser importance, are all associated with this Kaitchalan cult. In these ceremonies various phases of his activities are dramatically portrayed. He controls the forces of nature, and very definitely influences the lives of the people to-day. His power is exercised in a benign and helpful way, but he can be greatly angered by breaches of the tribal laws. In this cult there is little that is objectionable, and much that is admirable. The ceremonies associated with this cult are marked by great reverence and spiritual passion, and one feels that there is in them a real searching after spiritual truth.

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THE ABORIGINES OF EAST ARNHEM LAND

X Proposed New Methodist Station
Present Stations: Darwin, Goulburn Island, and Milingimbi